Thinking like the Judge

We are losing rounds because of a failure to communicate to the judge, not a failure to out-argue the opponent. It takes a lot of work to take the judge’s variables out of the equation. Debaters should stop only trying to beat the opponent, but rather, debaters need to concern themselves with communicating to the judge that they’re winning. Portions of the activities, both before and after the round, need to demonstrate your dominance.

Judges are tired, especially toward a tournament’s end. For each one you do, your judge does two. Judges are grumpy and poorly fed. They truly want to be somewhere else.

In LD, judges’ paradigms are less significant than in other types of debate, such as policy. Entire sections of your speeches need to communicate that you’re winning. The idea is that judges’ preferences only matter when there are holes in the round that must be filled in. That event is a failure on your part.

Pre-round: Large amounts of information about judges are now available to debaters. Thus, try to research judge paradigms online. Many judges who don’t even leave the local circuit have paradigms online. (judgephilosophies.wikispaces.com) Teammates, friends, and old ballots can help fill in the missing information. Be prepared to start the debate on-time: the judge wants the round to end on-time. Even if you’ve read about the judge, ask specific questions before the round about the judge’s philosophy. Get a sense of general skill level: “What do you think the interaction of the criterion is in the round?” Don’t ask ridiculous small talk questions to the judge. Try to inspect the judge’s judging instruments.

Modifying normal pre-round prep to become judge-friendly: First, don’t confuse the judge. Make sure you’re on the same page of every issue at every step of the round. Don’t allow the judge to stop flowing. Do not require the judge to think too much. In terms of case-writing, keep in mind the question how to keep the case judge-friendly. Don’t be needlessly complex. Being clear is more important than using big words. Next, do not hide arguments whatsoever. Good opponents won’t be fooled by trickery, and you run the risk of confusing the judge. Make sure judges know exactly where an argument is when you extend it. Organization and case clarity are also more important to judges than to debaters. Differentiate between when arguments begin and end, making your rebuttals much easier. The function of each argument should be clear: is it offensive or defensive? When reading the case, slow down at certain points to ensure the judge will get down what they need. Don’t write certain cases for certain types of judges. Ideally, however, judges should not be cued for specific judges. The 1AC must be understandable after the 1AC: judges will feel unethical voting in the 2AR for an unclear position.

Cross-examination: People think judges don’t care, but it is still important. Cross-examination can win you a round, or at least make it so that you have no excuse to lose the round. Perceptual dominance is key because the opponents interact side-by-side. This is the time in the round to show that your opponent or his arguments are silly. Judges can evaluate who knows more about the topic and who is the better debater. Do not only ask clarification questions. They allow your opponent to demonstrate his knowledge of the case. Also, asking the questions makes you look bad for an inability to flow your opponent’s case. A better strategy than clarifying, ask questions that clarify your opponent’s responsibilities in the round. Establish chokepoints that your opponent must win to meet the burden. Don’t make arguments in cross-examination, however. Also, many people forget to then bring them up in rebuttals. Don’t treat cross-examination like a total waste of time, though. If you get a concession or make a good point in cross-examination, you have the responsibility to apply the point while responding to arguments in the previous speech.

Rebuttals: First of all, avoid repetition. It causes judges to tune out and become uninterested. Along the same line, don’t spend too much time on one argument. A few smart, well-constructed arguments will be sufficient for a judge to understand the point. Organization is key. Judges need to know where you are on the flow. Make sure responses’ functions are clear. Spend enough time on important spikes and extensions. Developing arguments sufficiently is necessary to make judges feel comfortable with an argument. Don’t only make counterclaims against arguments: actually refute them. Condense the round and crystallize at the end of second rebuttals. End the round as soon as possible. Make a “game over” issue the first issue in the speech. Similarly, spend time explaining why your opponent’s “game over” issue is not game over. Avoid the worst-case scenario that you claim you’re winning every argument in the round. Mature debaters can admit that they’re losing some arguments yet still outweigh their opponent. Appeal to the judge’s fear of intervention. Explain why a judge can’t vote on an argument. Also, treat the second rebuttal like an argument with the judge for why they voted against you. Give a colored tinge to how the judge and the round’s interaction will play out. Commentary becomes very important, especially in rounds late in a tournament. Make the previous speech’s strategy transparent.

Post-round: First, write down the judge’s oral critique. It gives you more intelligence on the judge. It helps your rebuttal redoes after the fact. It allows the judge to think that you’re a respectful person who cares about what they say. Some judges are very open and will tell you what your arguments are susceptible to. Keep track of who judges you and how they react to your debate skills. Don’t badmouth your judges. It’s just disrespectful. It’s poor strategy. Don’t act uninterested during feedback. Don’t pack up during the 2AR. Judges won’t change their decision. Evaluate the judge’s body language and reaction.